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DEISM HISTORICALLY DEFINED

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There is no accepted definition of Deism. If you try to find out what it is from the books and articles that discuss it you will be left in confusion. Scholars differ as to what should be considered characteristic of the movement; some emphasize one thing, some another. Often it is conceived wholly, or almost wholly, as a metaphysical theory, which represents God as the Creator of the world, but now as withdrawn and separate from it and its concerns; it is the absentee God of literature. There is no foundation in fact for this interpretation of Deism. With the exception of Herbert of Cherbury the Deists scarcely touched philosophical problems.

Often Deism is presented as an undefined movement that fostered a hostile attitude toward the supernatural in religion. In one sense this is true. And frequently it is defined as a type of unbelief, as a reconstruction of Christianity that leaves little that is vitally characteristic of the Christian religion. These definitions, though they vary greatly, agree in one respect; they are almost wholly negative, they represent Deism as other than or as contrary to some accepted standard; but they fail to say what it really was.

These more or less popular definitions of Deism are wrong or inadequate. Deism was a phase in the history of religious thought; it should therefore be defined historically with reference to the thought of the age in which it flourished. A proper definition should show how it is related to and how it is distinguished from the historical background on which it appeared.

There were two focal concepts in the speculative thinking of this period, which were not always clearly distinguished, though almost everybody used them. It was the fashion then, in the best circles of learned men, to appeal to nature and reason, to think that beliefs and institutions were adequately grounded

only when they could be explained in terms of nature and reason. Before this, explanation had been almost wholly in terms of the supernatural; this was an ultimate in accounting for things. But in the Renaissance man discovered nature and himself as a part of it; and he was convinced that all truth must be in harmony with it. He also saw that reason, though magnified by the scholastics, had been fettered by tradition; that its chief use had been merely that of an instrument for vindicating authoritatively given systems. It had been used, not primarily as a discoverer of truth, but rather as the defender of propositions that were accepted as true on the basis of authority. But the progressive thinker of England of the seventeenth century was convinced that principles can be accepted and beliefs can be held by a rational being, such as man, only because they rest on sufficient reason. Therefore all systems, human and divine, were called upon in the name of nature and reason to give an account of themselves. The spirit of the age was rationalistic and critical. And once this movement had begun, religion could not remain long unchallenged. Men felt that they must be able to give a reason for the faith that is in them in terms of the thought of the age in which they lived. Therefore they tried to show that religion was grounded in nature, and that it was approved by "right reason."

At the beginning of the century "the learned Dr. Hooker," in his great work on *Ecclesiastical Polity*, derived order, more especially ecclesiastical order, not only from revelation, but also from nature; for nature is of God; her laws are made by him; her message is his word.¹ He also appealed to reason and magnified its importance for religious belief with a frequency that is surprising. He expressly taught that the earnestness of conviction does not guarantee the truth of opinions, but the "soundness of those reasons whereupon the same is built." This alone can assure us that they are from God and not from an evil spirit. To follow authority in religion without hearkening to reason is to behave like cattle in a herd.²

¹ Richard Hooker, "Ecclesiastical Polity," *Works*, I (Oxford, 1888), 146, 166, 206-10, 227.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 150, 151, 231-34, 281, 299, 321-30.

Hooker merely voiced the spirit of the age, which assumed that all reality is rational, that no sort of truth can contradict reason, and that nature is a revelation of God's will. Therefore it was generally believed that if the Christian religion is true it must be rational, and that it must be in harmony with nature; for God could not give man one system of religious truth through nature and another through revelation.

All progressive thinkers of this period, and many who were markedly conservative, assumed this, and undertook to demonstrate "the reasonableness of Christianity" and its harmony with natural religion. Almost everybody took part in this discussion. Among the leaders were Stillingfleet, Chillingworth; in fact all the so-called "rational theologians," the Cambridge Platonists, Tillotson, Sherlock, Locke the philosopher, Boyle, who was really a theologian as well as a chemist, and the whole race of Deists from Herbert of Cherbury on, and later Prideaux and Bishop Butler. Most of these men were quite conservative, some were pillars of orthodoxy, while others were hostile to traditional supernaturalism. But they all held that the beliefs of a rational being, whether in religion or in any other field of human interest, must have some other foundation than mere authority. Therefore they undertook to show that Christianity had such a foundation.

But though their general purpose and fundamental principles were the same, they differed widely. Most writers strove to vindicate traditional views by a sympathetic rationalistic testing of inherited dogmas; but some became ever more hostile in their criticisms of old beliefs and developed teachings that tended to undermine traditional views. Toward the close of the seventeenth century the divergence became so marked that a vigorous debate began concerning the authority and the content of the supernatural as over against that which is naturally or rationally mediated. This was the beginning of the deistic controversy, which extended through the first half of the next century.

The main points in these discussions were the relation of reason and revelation, the truth and authority of revelation and scripture, the fact and evidential value of miracles, and the importance and authority of natural religion when compared with positive or revealed religion.

At first the old statement concerning the relation of reason and revelation, which had come down from Thomas Aquinas, was accepted by all. They taught that revelation could give man that which was above reason, but nothing contrary to reason. In this even the first Deist, Herbert of Cherbury, concurred. But later Blount hesitated, and Toland asserted unequivocally in the title of *Christianity not Mysteriorious*, "that there is nothing in the Gospel contrary to Reason, nor above It." This became the characteristic teaching of Deism when it was at its height. The Deists who came later merely said the same thing in different words, though they often showed a more radical spirit. Bolingbroke declared that he who claimed a revelation added to reason was mad.¹ But all who opposed Deism defended the traditional formula.

Practically everybody except the Deists accepted supernatural revelation as a fact, and identified it with the Bible; they also asserted unequivocally its supreme authority. But Herbert, though he did not deny revelation, claimed that it could be authoritative only for him who received it originally; for all others it was merely tradition. Half a century later Stillingfleet published *A Letter to a Deist*, which is said to be the first formal reply to Deism. In this he attacked an unnamed person who evidently had developed Herbert's line of criticism still further. This otherwise unknown writer even questioned the sincerity of the apostles as witnesses; he claimed that there is no reason to believe things that were written so long ago under conditions that make the reports untrustworthy; and that scripture is full of confusion and contradictions. Toland and Collins were more conservative.

But as the discussion progressed the dividing lines became more sharply drawn, and from Tindal on we have a progressively radical criticism of revelation and scripture. Some went so far as to claim that revelation is not necessary, and that if it really did occur, it has no authority; and that the Bible is full of errors and confusion.²

¹ Bolingbroke, *Works*, VI (London, 1809), 170, 171.

² Tindal, *Christianity as Old as Creation* (London, 1735), pp. 8, 59, 188, 195, and elsewhere throughout the book; Bolingbroke, *Works*, VI, 148, 170, 171, 238, and elsewhere; Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher* (London, 1740), I, 15, 20; III, Preface.

The extraordinary manifestations of supernatural power in the natural order, which are known to us as miracles, were accepted as facts but with critical reservations by the Deists. Even the most radical Deists did not consider them impossible. But generally speaking the deistic attitude toward miracles was hostile. Certain biblical accounts were questioned, and others were denied or explained away in terms of the ordinary processes of nature. With the surprising exceptions of Toland and Bolingbroke, the Deists denied the evidential value of miracles, which was accepted by practically all other writers on the subject, including the philosopher Locke and the chemist Boyle.¹

The most significant point in the deistic controversy concerned natural religion. A man can be classified if you know what he taught concerning it. It is the field where deistic and non-deistic thinking is most clearly distinguished. But the problem here did not concern the fact of natural religion. That was accepted by both parties in the debate. In this critical age practically everybody, certainly every progressive thinker, discussed religion in terms of nature and reason. But the extremely critical attitude of the Deists resulted in ever greater hostility to the traditional emphasis on positive religion.

The question was: What is the value of natural religion? How is it related to positive religion? Which is normative for the other: is it to be tested by positive religion, or is positive religion to be tested by it? The non-deistic writers recognized the importance of natural religion but emphasized its limitations and the normative authority of revealed religion; while the Deists emphasized the limitations of positive religion and the superiority and normative authority of natural religion.

Again Hooker is typical of the more progressive thinkers of the century. He taught that man by the light of his own reason can know something of God and of certain of his duties toward God

¹ Blount, *Philostratus* (London, 1680), Bk. I, chap. iv, illustration 1; chap. v, illustrations 6 and 7; Toland, *Christianity Not Mystical*, pp. 47, 141-47; Hodegus (London, 1720), pp. 5 ff.; Collins, *A Discourse on Freethinking* (London, 1713), pp. 160, 174, 175; Woolston, *A Discourse on the Miracles of Our Saviour* (London, 1728), pp. 3-5; Bolingbroke, *Works*, VI, 240, 258 ff., 283 ff., 288; Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, I, 79, 89, 98, 99; II, 50 ff.

and man; but the way of salvation must be supernaturally revealed.¹ In this all the rational theologians concurred. Sherlock, the champion of orthodoxy, did not hesitate to teach that "the religion of the Gospel is the true original religion of reason and nature. It is so in part; it is all that, and more."² This, with individual variations, is the teaching of Stillingfleet, the Cambridge Platonists, Locke, Boyle, and others.³ They all think that natural religion is important, but they also teach in no uncertain terms that it is inadequate, and that it must be and actually is supplemented by revelation.

When we come to the Deists we find ourselves in a different atmosphere. They use the same general principles, they have the same rationalistic critical way of approach to the problems concerning the authority and content of supernaturally mediated religion; but they apply them much more radically and arrive at very different conclusions. Herbert, seventy-five years before Toland, considered supernatural revelation authoritative only for him who received it, its traditional records uncertain, and his five articles of natural religion absolutely clear and certain, and therefore supreme.⁴ Blount taught that all faiths had been shaken except those which are based on natural reason.⁵ Tindal, in *Christianity as Old as Creation*, which was at once recognized as a standard and typical work of Deism and was called the "Deists' Bible," teaches that natural religion was given men from the beginning, that it is absolutely perfect, and that external revelation can neither add to it nor take from it, and that it is always supreme over all revelation, which must be judged by it.⁶ Wollaston and

¹ Hooker, *Works*, I, 205, 227-33, 259, 269, 331-34, and elsewhere.

² Sherlock, *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions* (Oxford, 1797), pp. 134-43, 148.

³ John Tulloch, *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy* (London, 1872), I, 427, 430; II, 70, 99; Robert Boyle, *Works*, V (London, 1744), 46, 685; Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity*.

⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, art., "Herbert"; "Mind," 1894, art. by W. R. Sorley.

⁵ *Religio Laici* (London, 1683), pp. 81-91; *Oracles of Reason*. Toland and Collins have little to say about natural religion, though they recognize its importance; however, Toland later in *Nazarenus* is very hostile to positive religion.

⁶ *Christianity as Old as Creation*, pp. 3-6, 59, 85 ff., 141 ff., 164, 178, 328, and elsewhere.

Bolingbroke wrote largely in the spirit of Tindal. But Morgan was more radical; he was probably the most extreme writer in asserting that natural religion is sure and free from error and faults, and should therefore be taken as the standard for judging all so-called revealed religion.

As a result of this attitude toward positive and natural religion they tended to resolve all religion into an ethical system on a theistic background.

The characteristic deistic views as developed in this controversy can be summed up thus: In an age that was rationalistic and critical, when all progressive thinkers, many of whom were conservative, felt that they must justify religion by proving it from reason and nature, the Deists developed those tendencies in a radical way, and fostered a hostile attitude toward traditional supernaturalism. They denied the possibility of any religious truth above reason; they challenged external revelation and criticized its records and the miraculous; they emphasized the perfection of natural religion, which man of his own unaided powers could know, and set it up as supreme over all positive religion, which was imperfect because of "mysteries," "uncertainties," "contradictions," and "confusion."

Deism, which was essentially non-philosophical, was the more radical application to religious problems of the rationalistic critical way of thinking, that characterized English thought in the seventeenth century, which resulted in the progressive depreciation of the supernatural, especially as it appeared in positive religion, and in magnifying the worth and authority of natural religion.